

## Assessment of neighborhood satisfaction by residents of three housing types.

By: Kenneth J. Gruber and Gladys G. Shelton

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### **Abstract:**

A highly influential but often underemphasized determinant of residential satisfaction is how residents perceive and feel about their neighborhoods. In this study, factors representing different aspects of residents' neighborhoods were identified and examined in relation to their overall assessment of their homes and neighborhoods. Relationships among neighborhood aspects and overall housing and neighborhood assessments were examined separately for residents of conventional homes, mobile homes, and apartments. Results based on all residents indicated that evaluations of neighborhood aspects were unrelated to housing satisfaction, but were moderately related to positive sentiments and satisfaction with the neighborhood. Separate analyses by housing type revealed that neighborhood perceptions of apartment residents were influential in affecting housing satisfaction. For all residents, the neighborhood's attractiveness and pleasant-friendliness were the most important determinants of neighborhood acceptance and satisfaction. The results also indicated that despite sharing similar determinant patterns of neighborhood acceptance with the other two housing type groups, the basis for mobile home residents' evaluations was considerably less related to the factors identified as influential. The findings indicated that different neighborhood factors formed the basis for differences in overall housing and neighborhood satisfaction among residents living in the three housing types. However, since the type of housing does not by itself define a neighborhood, the differences that were found need to be considered in the larger context of other components of a neighborhood like economic and community characteristics typically associated with a specific structure type.

**Keywords:** neighborhood satisfaction | social indicators | neighborhood relationships | community relationships

### **Article:**

## INTRODUCTION

Research measuring residents' satisfaction with their housing has typically focused primarily on the housing unit itself with minor or limited emphasis on the surrounding environment (e.g. see Harris, 1976; McCray & Day, 1977; Stewart & McKown, 1977). However, housing cannot be separated from its surroundings and level of acceptance or satisfaction may be more dependent on where the unit is situated than on its actual or perceived quality. Studies of public and low income housing have tended to support this point by reporting that residents would rather remain where they are, even if it means continuing to live in dilapidated or run-down structures than to move to new units away from friends and the familiarity of their homes and neighborhoods (Hartman, 1963).

Campbell, *et al.*, (1976) suggested that people's housing environments should be conceptualized as residential environments consisting of the housing unit, the neighborhood, and the community in which they are located. In these investigators' view, housing environments represent "nested environmental realms" with the dwelling unit being contained within the neighborhood and both within the community. Of the three realms, the most important is the individual dwelling unit. Not only is the dwelling unit the more personal and immediate of the three realms, it also defines, at least by geographic location, the other two realms. However, the level of quality of one's residential environment cannot be determined by considering just the housing unit alone. The three realms combined define an individual's residential environment and the quality of that environment directly impacts the residents' perceived housing environment quality.

Since research comparing residents' satisfaction with their housing units has shown that residents of different housing types of comparable value located in the same areas perceive the quality of their housing units similarly (Gray, *et al.*, 1980; Lindamood, 1976; Moore & Crocker, 1979; Pike & Stubbs, 1978), this study focused on Campbell *et al.*'s (1976) next realm of the residential environment - the neighborhood as it relates to residents' perceived environment quality. Although the importance of the neighborhood as a critical determinant of housing environment quality has been well established, comparisons of assessment of neighborhood quality and characteristics by residents of different housing types have not been widely studied (Shelton, *et al.*, 1983). Moreover, few studies have examined specific aspects of neighborhood quality and characteristics in relation to overall housing satisfaction and satisfaction with the neighborhood.

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that comprise residents' perceptions of their neighborhoods and relate these factors to their overall assessment of their neighborhoods and housing unit satisfaction. Because different housing types likely represent different housing environments, the goal of this analysis was to determine if characteristics of the neighborhood represent an important determinant of neighborhood and overall housing satisfaction. Evaluations of specific aspects of the neighborhoods were related to: (1) overall satisfaction with the home, (2) feelings about living in the neighborhood, and (3) overall satisfaction with the neighborhood for residents of three housing types - conventional homes, mobile homes, and apartments.

The data analyzed for this study were selected from a larger data set collected between July 1980 and June 1981 by Shelton, *et al.* (1983). The original sample consisted of 305 residents living in low-to-moderate priced housing (having tax assessments of \$ 33,000 or less or rental costs of \$ 300 per month or less) in 11 counties in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. The sample was selected using tax records, telephone directories, and real estate listings in order to obtain comparable size samples of residents from conventional homes, mobile homes, and apartments. The resulting respondent samples consisted of 105 conventional home, 90 mobile home, and 110 apartment residents. For a more complete description of the sampling methodology and a complete description of the interview schedule and data collection procedures, see Shelton, *et al.* (1983). Two sets of neighborhood evaluation variables were analyzed for this study. The first set included items relating to characteristics and features of respondents' neighborhoods. For this set, respondents were asked to rate how satisfied they were with each characteristic/feature. These ratings were made on 5-point likert-type satisfaction/dissatisfaction scales with 5 associated with being "satisfied". The second set of variables represented evaluations of selected neighborhood attributes. For this set, respondents were asked to evaluate attributes on a 5-point semantic differential scale. As an example, respondents were asked to indicate whether they perceived their neighborhoods to be noisy or quiet. On a scale like the one presented below, respondents were asked to circle the number that most closely represented their perception of their neighborhood as noisy/quiet.

	noisy				quiet
	1	2	3	4	5

## RESULTS

Separate factor analyses using the principle components method with varimax rotation were performed on the two sets of neighborhood assessment variables. These analyses produced factor solutions (with eigenvalues greater than or equal to one) of three Neighborhood and Community Characteristic factors (55.4% variability explained) and six Neighborhood Attributes factors (62.6% variability explained). The results are presented in Table I. Only loadings 0.50 or greater are shown.

**Tables 1-4 are omitted from this formatted document.**

Mean factor scores, presented in Table II, were computed by housing type for the two variable sets. Comparison by housing type of the factor scores, representing the three Neighborhood and Community Characteristics factors, revealed significant differences for Attractiveness of Neighborhood ( $F(2,215) = 18.50, P < 0.001$ ) and Public Services ( $F(2,215) = 5.38, P < 0.006$ ). *Post hoc* comparisons of Attractiveness of Neighborhood indicated that conventional home residents perceived their neighborhoods as significantly more attractive than did mobile home

and apartment residents. Mobile home residents also evaluated their neighborhoods as being significantly more attractive in comparison with residents of apartments. On the Public Service variable, conventional home residents were significantly less satisfied with the quality of public services in their communities in comparison with residents of mobile homes and apartments. The latter two groups were about equally satisfied with the quality of the Public Services available.

Comparison by housing type of the six factors representing the Neighborhood Attributes variables yielded only two significant differences, Closed Space ( $F(2,286) = 30.11, P < 0.0001$ ) and Traffic/Noise ( $F(2,286) = 3.40, P < 0.05$ ). For Closed Space *post hoc* comparisons indicated that residents of apartments perceived their neighborhoods as offering significantly less open space (small lot sizes, few trees) than did either conventional home or mobile home residents. The latter two groups perceived the amount of closed space in their neighborhoods similarly. For Traffic/Noise, mobile home residents were significantly more likely to be bothered than were apartment residents.

The relationships of respondents' perceptions of their neighborhoods with overall assessments of their homes and neighborhoods examined via stepwise multiple regression analysis are presented in Tables III-V. In each table, results of the two variable sets regressed separately on three assessment variables, (1) Overall satisfaction with the home, (2) Feelings about living in the neighborhood, and (3) Overall satisfaction with the neighborhood are presented for all respondents and by respondents of each housing type. (Although, ideally it would have been preferable to combine the two variable sets, the approximately 60 case difference in sample size made it more appropriate to examine the variable sets separately).

#### Overall Satisfaction with the Home

The regression results relating neighborhood perceptions to respondents' assessment of their overall satisfaction with their homes are presented in Table III. Respondents' evaluations of the Neighborhood and community characteristics were better predictors (higher adjusted  $r^2$  value) of overall satisfaction with the home than were their evaluations of the Neighborhood attributes. For the Neighborhood and community characteristics, Attractiveness of neighborhood was the most important determinant of housing satisfaction for residents of the three housing types. In comparison to the other two groups, apartment residents' satisfaction with Neighborhood and community characteristics related the highest to their overall satisfaction with their homes. The predictive relationship was the least related for the mobile home residents. For the results of the Neighborhood Attributes regressions, the best predictive relationship again involved apartment residents. The Pleasant/Friendly and Good Recreation qualities of their neighborhoods were positively related to positive overall satisfaction with the home.

#### *Feelings about Living in the Neighborhood*

In Table IV, respondents' perceptions of their neighborhoods are related to their feelings about living in their neighborhood. The results of the analyses performed on the two perception

variable sets indicate that respondents' assessments of the Neighborhood and community characteristics related slightly better (based on adjusted  $r^2$  values) to their Feelings about living in the neighborhood than did their evaluations of Neighborhood attributes. The regression equations show that respondents' feelings about their neighborhoods were strongly related to their perceptions of the Attractiveness of neighborhood factor. Apartment residents' evaluations of neighborhood attractiveness related the strongest to their feelings about their neighborhoods. The results of the neighborhood attribute regressions indicate that respondents' feelings about living in their neighborhoods were determined mainly by their perceptions of their neighborhoods as being Pleasant/Friendly, lacking Traffic/Noise, and providing opportunities for Good Recreation. This relationship pattern was very similar for residents of conventional homes and apartments, but less characteristic of mobile home residents. For the latter group of residents, their feelings about their neighborhoods were markedly less related to their evaluation of Neighborhood attributes.

#### *Overall Satisfaction with the Neighborhood*

Table V presents the results relating respondents' neighborhood perceptions to their Overall satisfaction with the neighborhood. In this set of analyses, the relationship of Neighborhood attributes to neighborhood satisfaction was stronger (based on adjusted  $r^2$  values) than was the relationship for Neighborhood and community characteristics. The results indicate that across housing type, Attractiveness of neighborhood, was the most important determinant of residents' overall satisfaction with their neighborhoods. For all housing types, residents' evaluations of the characteristics of their neighborhood and community related moderately well with their overall neighborhood satisfaction. The strongest explanatory relationship was found for residents of conventional homes. For the Neighborhood attributes regressions, the results indicate that different clusters of variables were significantly related to the overall satisfaction with the neighborhood for each housing type group. Residents' evaluations of the neighborhood as Pleasant/Friendly was the only consistent (though most important) determinant of overall satisfaction with the neighborhood. The strength of the explanatory equations show that the attributes assessed were highly related to the level of neighborhood satisfaction reported by apartment and conventional home residents, but were only moderately related for mobile home residents.

## DISCUSSION

The results indicated that evaluations of neighborhood characteristics and attributes were more closely related to respondents' overall satisfaction with and positive assessments of their neighborhoods than with their homes. When considered by housing type, however, apartment residents' evaluations of their neighborhood characteristics and attributes were actually one percent stronger (35% vs. 34% variability explained) in relation to overall housing satisfaction than with overall satisfaction with the neighborhood. This suggests that for apartment residents, the perceived quality of their neighborhoods was a relatively more important determinant in how

they felt about their housing situations than it was for conventional home or mobile home residents. This is probably due to the fact that the location and many aspects of the neighborhood environment of apartments are much less under the control of the residents in comparison with the level of control available to the other two groups of residents. In an apartment setting, usually it is not permissible to alter the physical conditions outside the unit to increase privacy, improve parking and recreation, or make the area more attractive and pleasant. Nor do apartment residents have much choice over where their units are located; multi-family housing often is permitted only in designated areas in a community. Hence, residents' evaluations of their homes are likely to be influenced by what they perceived their neighborhoods to be like. Although some of the same characteristics no doubt apply to mobile homes (and to an even lesser extent to conventional homes) the extent of influence of this groups' evaluations of their neighborhoods on their overall housing satisfaction was very minimal, suggesting that they had more control over their neighborhood environment.

The results of the analyses revealed that across housing type, the most important influences of respondents' positive assessments of and satisfaction with their neighborhoods were related to the extent to which they perceived their neighborhoods to be attractive, pleasant, and friendly. Lack of traffic and noise and the availability of good recreation were, to a lesser degree, also important influences. Although this pattern was generally true for all three housing type groups, the results indicated that mobile home residents' evaluations of their neighborhoods were less related to their overall assessments of their neighborhoods than either those of conventional home or apartment residents. Examination of Tables IV and V suggest that while differences in explanatory strength of the analyses involving Neighborhood and community characteristics were inconsequential, differences were much greater involving Neighborhood attributes. The resulting differences *can* be traced to the strong influence of the Pleasant/Friendly factor among mobile home residents as compared with conventional home and apartment residents. Apparently, mobile home residents' overall feelings about and satisfaction with their neighborhoods were less related to perceptions of their neighborhoods being Pleasant/Friendly places to live and more related to factors not included in the variables evaluated.

The results of this study suggest that Campbell *et al.*, (1976) were correct in drawing the distinction between needing to consider the house (or unit) and neighborhood as two separate "realms" within the residential environment. Based on the data reported here, it would seem that this second "realm" is more aesthetic than substantive, but this distinction is not to suggest that its existence and influence on housing environment quality are unimportant. Rather, this point is made to recognize that the impact of the physical characteristics of the neighborhood on residents is largely dependent on their subjective evaluations of the importance of the neighborhood to them. In line with Connerly and Marans (1985), the impact of satisfaction with the neighborhood may be considerably lessened if residents hold little attachment to the neighborhood. Hence, in future research, to obtain a more informative measurement of residents' evaluations of their neighborhoods, it will be important to direct attention to measuring residents'

perceptions of the image they have of their neighborhoods as place to live as well as whether it provides them the opportunities, comforts, and amenities they desire.

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## **NOTE**

\* Because it is often not possible to apply a strict geophysical description to define what constitutes a neighborhood, it is necessary to define a neighborhood in terms of its residents and the similarities of culture, social status, ethnicity, and common bonds they might share (Mukherjee, 1980; Russ-Eft, 1979). The concept of "neighborhood" like that of "home" can take on many meanings to different people and one definition however broad or general may still be inadequate to account for some residents' conceptualization of what they consider to be their neighborhood (Hayward, 1977). Consequently, it is important to recognize that whatever definition of neighborhood is applied it is likely to have some conceptual and perceptual limitations. In this study, to avoid imposing a limiting definition of neighborhood on respondents, no attempt was made to strictly define neighborhood in terms of physical or psychosocial boundaries. Respondents were asked to make their evaluations based on their own conceived notion of what constituted their neighborhood.

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